

Leaving Newton Behind:
Approaches to Successful Change for Leaders

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Introduction

Being successful at leading change is one of the challenges that organizational leaders face. Edgar Schein in his book “Organizational Culture and Leadership” and Margaret Wheatley in her book “Leadership and the New Science,” provide two different models to guide leaders in their approach to change management. Both authors offer concepts and skills that are important for leaders to understand and embody in order to navigate organizational change. In addition, the theories offered by Schein and Wheatley can be a guide for organizational consultants who are working with leaders.

Schein’s Theory of Organizational Leadership

Edgar Schein presents a theory of leadership and its impact on culture in his book titled, “Organizational Culture and Leadership.” From his research, Schein concludes that “leadership is intertwined with culture formation, evolution, transformation, and destruction” (Schein, 2004, 414). In order for leaders to successfully steer organizations through a continuously changing environment or transition out of dysfunctional states, they should possess certain leadership qualities. According to Schein, these qualities include: perception and insight, motivation, emotional strength, ability to change cultural assumptions, and ability to create involvement and participation.

A leader needs to have the ability to perceive problems as well as have insight into how best to solve them. Leaders cannot fix issues that they do not see or understand. This can be more challenging when it is a weakness of the leader that is causing the problem in the first place. In that situation, leaders need to be aware enough and flexible enough to work through the problem without getting overly defensive or inhibiting

resolution out of personal feelings. The more objective leaders can be about themselves and their limitations, the better they can serve their organizations.

In addition to perception and insight, leaders need to have the motivation and skills to affect organizational change. Leaders need to be willing to change the organization from its present state into something more effective. Dealing with issues sometimes requires leaders to seek help from outside their organizations. This can be a challenge to leaders who believe that they should be able to do things themselves. Leaders need to put the health of their organizations above their own personal desires. This motivation also needs to be communicated through the organization itself so that the employees know the leader is in support of change.

During periods of change, when there can be a heightened sense of anxiety among organizational members, leaders need to possess the emotional strength to support the process. This can be a major challenge for leaders when they are making changes that incite the anger or criticism of employees. Schein gives the examples of having to close down a division of the company which had been an original source of the company's growth and had provided an identity to many employees, laying off valued employees, or admitting that the founders original values no longer fit in the business environment. Under these circumstances leaders need to be especially diligent in showing their commitment to positive change in the organization.

In addition to commitment, leaders need to be able to change the cultural assumptions in place within their organizations. In order for organizations to let go of current assumptions, leaders need to discover and integrate new or modified assumptions.

While the new assumptions do not need to come from the leaders themselves, it is important for the leaders to direct the change to the updated assumptions.

A major part of being able to affect culture change is the ability of leaders to create involvement and participation by the employees of their organizations. Not only do leaders need to have insight into the need for change, but employees themselves need to have a similar insight. The way leaders can spread their vision is to have organizational members actively involved in the change process. The leaders also must have the support of the employees in order to carry out the organizational changes that need to occur. Having the participation of organizational members also guards against leaders making changes that are inappropriate for their organizations.

Wheatley's Theory of Organizational Leadership

In her book titled, "Leadership and the New Science," Margaret Wheatley presents a model of what leadership could look like if founded on the principles of the new science. Wheatley looks at new science research from physics, biology, and chemistry, as well as theories of evolution and chaos. The major difference in new science is the shift from the mechanistic Newtonian world view to the focus on holism. "Systems are understood as whole systems, and attention is given to relationships within those networks" (Wheatley, 1999, 10), rather than studying in isolation the separate parts of a system. In keeping with the idea of holism, Wheatley presents a network of ideas on leadership rather than creating a model with distinct boxes and categories. Beyond the foundation of holism, two concepts that stand out are connection and chaos.

A major theme in Wheatley's work is the importance of connection. The concept of holism describes systems as one large unit with multiple internal relationships and

connections. Leadership from a holistic perspective would be made up of organic networks and not the traditional hierarchical structures. The leader's responsibility in such an organization is to help the organization connect with itself in order for it to learn and change. Wheatley suggests that organizations are fractal in nature, in that if a pattern is occurring at one level of the organization it is likely occurring at many or all other levels in some way. Also, when a part is not operating well, leaders would use the spider-web metaphor and reweave what is broken rather than cutting it out or removing it. This action serves to strengthen the whole network instead of weakening it with holes or gaps. Wheatley also suggests a leader needs to help people connected with the identity of the organization, new information, and develop relationships with people anywhere in the system.

Wheatley regards chaos as a natural force to be accepted and worked with in organizations. Similar to nature, organizations go through cycles. Part of this cycle includes periods of chaos during which things seem to fall apart or spin out of control. Usually, people tend to react by interfering immediately, trying to stabilize a situation before it deteriorates any further. What Wheatley suggests, however, is that if leaders can "retain clarity about the purpose and direction of the organization" (131), an organization can allow chaos to occur, work through it, and come out fine on the other side. The cycle of chaos (from structure to chaos and back) is similar to the cycle that occurs in Sherwood and Glidewell's Planned Renegotiation model (1973, 142) where groups go from stable relations and commitment through a period of disruption and back to stability. In both cases, during periods of chaos or disruption there is an opportunity for change and growth which can greatly benefit a group or an organization.

Schein vs. Wheatley—A Comparison of Leadership Theories

There are many similarities between the leadership models that Schein and Wheatley recommend. First, both Schein and Wheatley recognize and understand the cyclical nature of organizations. Second, they promote the idea of focusing on the organization as a whole. Wheatley names this explicitly in her work with the concept of holism versus Newtonianism. While Schein views the idea of organizational culture as an overarching element that ties an entire organization together. Third, they both know that an organization will change only if it sees the need for change. And finally, they understand the importance of involving everyone within an organization in the process of change.

Although on the whole Schein and Wheatley recommend complimentary leadership styles, there are differences between the two models. First, Schein still works more with the hierarchical leadership model where as Wheatley discusses the importance of autonomy and using the organic networks within organizations. Second, Schein seems to have more clearly prescribed steps for leaders and the process of cultural change. Wheatley's work is more about underlying principles and allowing the spontaneous evolution of change. Finally, Wheatley's work seems to be asking more questions about how leaders should approach leadership and change, while Schein's work offers answers and specific models to apply.

Using Schein's and Wheatley's Theories in the Client Context

Schein and Wheatley offer many ideas that can be used with clients working through a change process. Schein's five-part model lends itself to various types of

organization development interventions. Wheatley's theory provides a different perspective with which leaders can approach change.

Each of the five areas in Schein's leadership model enables a consultant to offer a variety of recommendations and advice to a client in a leadership position. Schein's model is useful in that it identifies various areas in which consultants can be of service to their clients. For the first area of perception and insight, I would recommend that leaders spend some time working on personal growth if they have not already begun to do so. In developing awareness about themselves, they will understand how to be aware of their employees and their organizations. Tools that might be useful in this process are taking personal inventories (e.g. MBTI, conflict management styles, Johari's Window, etc.), journaling, and coaching. Coaching in particular would offer a leader a guide to the process of awareness as well as bring in new perspectives.

For the second part of Schein's model, motivation and skills, a consultant can help by acknowledging the client's abilities. The client has already overcome, to a certain degree, the issue of bringing in outside help if a consultant has been hired. It would be important to gauge how much of an issue asking for outside help is, and to address it with the client if there seems to be lingering resentment or negative feelings. For this step, a consultant can assist a client in becoming aware of new skills that the client needs to master as well as offering training in this area if appropriate.

Consultants and coaches can serve leaders in the category of emotional strength by just being there and listening. Leaders can be the focus of a lot of negative attention and feedback during a change process. A consultant can be a resource for a leader to

cope with difficult situations, emotions, conflicts, or whatever challenges arise out of the change effort.

Schein's fourth area of ability to change cultural assumptions is one of the areas where the expertise of an organization development consultant could help the most. A consultant can help his or her client with a process to discover what changes need to take place, how to craft a vision to support the changes, and what interventions to use to implement the changes. In order to guide a client, a consultant can use the steps of the action research model as outlined by Thomas Cummings and Christopher Worley (2005, 24). The first two steps occur before a consultant is on the scene and include problem identification and then consulting with a behavioral science expert. After the consultant is involved with the project the steps include data gathering and preliminary diagnosis, feedback to a key client, joint diagnosis of the problem, joint action planning, action, and data gathering after action.

Similar to the fourth area, an organization development consultant can offer many process suggestions for Schein's fifth component of leadership, which is ability to create involvement and participation. An essential tool for leaders to create involvement and participation is the use of effective communication. John Kotter and Dan Cohen suggest the importance of communication to a successful change effort. Communication is defined as straightforward, heartfelt messages sent through multiple channels. The goal of communicating is to "induce understanding, develop a gut-level commitment, and liberate more energy from a critical mass of people" (Kotter and Cohen, 2002, 4). A consultant can remind his or her client of the importance of communicating with people throughout the organization during the process of change.

Wheatley's model of leadership offers useful suggestions for consultants assisting clients as well. The ideas she presents around holism, connection, and chaos can all be translated into approaches or actions within an organization. Her ideas are important because they address fundamental characteristics of organizations that typically are ignored. Ignorance can leave large stumbling blocks on the road to successful change efforts. With effort and awareness, leaders can work through and around potentially disruptive issues.

The concept of holism is a helpful perspective for consultants to hold while assisting leaders in change efforts. Holism both suggests a higher level of participation from all members of an organization as well as recognizing the interrelationship of various units within an organization. The former is important in designing an intervention in that a consultant and leader should include as many members of the organization as possible in the development of a change effort. The latter is important so that an intervention takes into consideration the impact a change effort will have on the whole, particularly if the effort is focused in a specific department of the organization. An example of an intervention is Marvin Weisbord's use of future search which is a "promising method for getting whole systems in one room" (1987, 281).

At the heart of Wheatley's concept of connection is the organic network that exists within each and every organization. Understanding how messages flow through an organization's network is important. Malcolm Gladwell's (2000) work on social epidemics in "The Tipping Point" offers some ideas on how networks work, which can be applied to support change in an organization. The three elements that lead to the broad distribution and acceptance of an idea are The Law of the Few, The Stickiness

Factor and The Power of Context. The Law of the Few is the concept that epidemics are spread by very few, charismatic, well-positioned individuals. In an organizational setting, picking the individuals with a lot of informal power to champion the change effort will give the effort a more likely chance of success. The Stickiness Factor is best explained by Gladwell, “there are specific ways of making a contagious message memorable; there are relatively simple changes in the presentation and structuring of information that can make a big difference in how much of an impact it makes” (Gladwell, 2000, 25). The lesson for leaders here is to create a clear message that is designed to be memorable and make an impact. Gladwell’s third point is the Power of Context, which says what is occurring in the environment at the time can have a huge impact on how people act and how change occurs or is thwarted. It is important for leaders to provide an environment that supports change as well as charge people with the responsibility for participating.

According to Wheatley, chaos is an inevitable part of organizational life. Unfortunately most people do not react well to chaos and attempt to eradicate it from their work. Karl Weick has some suggestions in his book “Making Sense of the Organization” which could help leaders faced with chaos. “One way managers cope with disorder is by presuming that there is a logic by which events cohere” (Weick, 2001, 48). This concept of underlying logic, or order, is similar to what Wheatley has discovered in her studies of the new science. By assuming a sense of order exists, there is less reason for a leader to panic when faced with an episode of chaos. Periods of chaos can result in organizational learning if leaders and their employees are prepared for them. A

consultant can assist a leader by helping him or her recognize chaos and normalize it so that people expect it and feel more comfortable when it arises.

Important Learning about Change and Leadership

My most important learning about change and leadership occurred when a prior manager of mine decided to change firms. Before leaving she asked three out of the four people on her team, myself included, to join her at the new company. I was told a week prior to this occurring and the change understandably initiated a period of chaos for our group. As a team we had a new organizational culture to navigate, new procedures to understand, the loss of a group member to assimilate, and a lot of work to do to reestablish ourselves. While this is not a change effort that occurred within one organization, it taught me a great deal about what is effective and what is not in the process of change.

The positive elements of the change came from both the new organization we joined as well as leadership from my manager. The single biggest thing that our manager did to help us through the change was to give us a clear task to complete. Also, during the initial phase she acknowledged how hard the transition would be and asked each of us to give our best. This acknowledgement and encouragement helped me focus on my work and put in the extra effort required to meet the deadline we had. The organization was supportive by providing us with the resources we needed (computers, phones, etc.). There were also people to answer our questions and help us get started. Fortunately, they were supportive of newcomers. We also gained a new group member, who was already an employee of the firm, and he offered a great deal of assistance.

There were some challenges to this change process as well. In terms of leadership, after the initial pep-talk from our manager, she was relatively silent throughout the rest of our transition process. I do not think she realized how long it would take us to truly settle in and be comfortable. From this I learned that change efforts take longer than one might expect and that it is important to communicate and support members throughout the process. From the organizational perspective, I realized the importance of the simple tools—computer and phone—when it took over a week to have them installed. In an ideal world, the organization would have the new physical space ready for its employees before moving them.

Conclusion

In order to be successful, leaders need to approach change with awareness, intentionality, and skill. Schein, Wheatley, and many others have provided thoughts, theories, and suggestions for leaders to employ in change efforts. Leaders can inform their world view by considering Wheatley's concepts of holism, connection, and chaos. At the same time, leaders can develop and improve their skills in Schein's five leadership qualities of perception and insight, motivation, emotional strength, ability to change cultural assumptions, and ability to create involvement and participation. While models and theories are valuable and useful, in the final analysis, it is how leaders lead change that matters most.

Resources

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